

## **‘All Art is Propaganda’: The Politics of Gender (Mis)Representation in Kuku’s and Ugonna’s Dialogic Narratives**

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### **Abstract**

The interaction of voices in textual interpretations does not exclusively take place within a single text but can be extrapolated to two or more literary texts, and this paper examines Kuku’s *Nearly All the Men in Lagos Are Mad* and Ugonna’s *Who Drove Nearly All Lagos Men Mad?* as propaganda tools used for gender (mis)representation. Framed by the critical theory of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism, it is revealed that a common thread connects all the stories in Kuku’s text: female experiences with often inconsiderate or manipulative men. It is further discovered that Ugonna’s collection of short stories does not prioritise focus on the madness but on the projection of women as pathogenetic agents of this supposed madness. Therefore, Ugonna’s collection of short stories is not necessarily a counter-narrative to Kuku’s text but an attempt to justify the madness of Lagos men so projected in Kuku’s collection of short stories, thereby posing more as an instrument of complementarity than that of polarity.

**Keywords:** Bakhtin; dialogism; gender; intertextuality; propaganda

### **1. Introduction**

The very essence of art — its definition, composition, representation, and purpose — has become a battleground of theories and arguments heavy enough to overwhelm creative and critical minds alike. As a mode of knowledge inquiry refracted through a multitude of lenses, some critics focus on the intrinsic beauty of art while others see it as a conduit for ideas, stories, and social critique. Still, some explore its historical and cultural echoes, tracing its influence on the fabric of social values, beliefs, and power, just as some admit that ‘Art is not always fair’ (Reilly, 1973, p.421). This diversity of perspectives means that what constitutes art and its purpose range from personal expression and emotional catharsis to social critique, and cultural preservation, amongst others. One of the popular theories of art that has been resounded by scholars over the decades is one whose source is many times associated with William Du Bois: that all art is propaganda. But to say that all art is propaganda may do something to a mind that conceives of literature (a spinoff of art) as one whose ‘emphasis is on life and living’ (Ewers, 1943, p.68). One may wonder: if all art is propaganda, and literature is tied to life and living, are life and living handcuffed to propaganda?

However, it is a fact that literature thrives on subjectivity, and this extends to how an author presents his narrative. Authors use subjectivity to mould reader perception and ignite variegated interpretations, and one way this manifests is via the presentation of life/reality, which some scholars have tagged as propaganda. The acceptance of the premise that all art is propaganda and the acknowledgement that literature reflects life and living suggests that life itself is inherently propagandistic. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that life is a grand, malicious scheme for deception. Instead, it implies that every interaction is a form of influence — just as art aims to convey a message, every interaction, story, and piece of media, shapes the understanding of the world and influences beliefs and behaviours. Du Bois (1926, p.295) contends that:

All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

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He argues that art is never neutral or objective; it always carries a message, whether explicit or implicit. This message, according to him, serves a particular agenda or worldview, making it a form of propaganda.

Du Bois unapologetically declares that his work has always been used as propaganda for gaining the rights of Black folk. On this note, art can be a powerful tool for challenging stereotypes, raising awareness about social issues, and inspiring reforms across various levels. 'Propaganda' often carries negative connotations, associated with manipulation and misinformation, but some scholars have detoxified it with novelty, using it to stress the conviction that authors do not spectate and report like journalists when writing but actively participate in influencing how the contents of their works are interpreted by readers. It is noteworthy that these popular words predate Du Bois and have been used by other critics like Morris Speare (1924, p.27); Upton Sinclair (1925, p.9); William Leonard (1932, p.330) who added colouring to it in his submission that 'all art is propaganda — though not all propaganda is art'; Bernard Shaw (1934, p.173): 'All great Art and Literature is propaganda'; Ann Petry (1950, p.33): 'All truly great art is propaganda'; George Orwell (2009, p.37) 'All art is propaganda. Neither Dickens himself nor the majority of Victorian novelists would have thought of denying this'.

The different forms and shades of art's propagandistic idea by the highlighted scholars are trailed by convincing arguments in favour of the belief that art is indeed propaganda. One such shade is Speare's (1924, p.27) position that:

It is not difficult to make out a case for the statement that in a sense all art is propaganda. By giving your own vision, by making your own interpretation of a state of things, you immediately exclude the views of others. The moment you begin to select and to emphasize you lay yourself open to the charge of preaching.

Speare's argument is that the very act of artistic creation is in itself a form of persuasion where presenting a unique perspective or interpretation of reality helps the artist prioritise certain viewpoints while suppressing others. This process of selection and emphasis, characteristic of any artistic endeavour, leads to a form of advocacy/propaganda. The artist's choice of what to depict, how to depict it, and what to highlight within the work, promotes a particular understanding or message, thereby opening themselves up to the notion that their work is not merely a neutral representation but an attempt to influence the consumer's perception. This emphasis within art transforms it, in a sense, into a form of preaching or propaganda, regardless of the content of such a work or the artist's intent.

Propaganda has been deployed in the projection of many ideologies in literary texts, ranging from the solemn and grave to the seemingly trivial and frivolous, with patriarchy being one such ideology. Usoro (2024, p.2) attests that 'When discourse on gender is initiated, female marginalisation is mostly conjured in the mind of the interlocutors, whether man or woman; national or cosmopolitan; elitist or egalitarian'. This is a testament to the predilection to associate gender discussions primarily with the issue of women's subordinate status, and that the dominant narrative surrounding gender is one of female oppression, disadvantage, or inequality. The domain of gender studies is a saturated field that has lodged arguments about the 'evil' nature of women by male writers and the 'devilish' character of men by female writers. Succinctly, Okon (2001, p.78) asserts that since the existence of man, 'the relationship between the sexes has always engendered conflicts'. Beautiful women are not exempted from negative stereotypical portraits but are even at the forefront, corroborated by Nnolim's (1987, p.45) claim that 'From the Edenic myth to modern times, beautiful women have been depicted as angels with feet of clay, as purveyors of unhappiness both for themselves and their male counterparts'. The duality of a beautiful woman is metaphorised by an angel with clay feet, amplifying the belief that she masks her (self-)destructiveness with an angelic garb.

On the other hand, female writers enfeeble male characters as evidenced in many literary texts including Nwapa's *Efuru*, the first Nigerian novel written by a woman, where the average male character is portrayed as socially, morally, and/or psychologically weak. Such derogatory terms as 'poor' (p.10), a 'nobody' (p.9), and 'imbecile' (p.11) are used to describe Efuru's first husband, Adizua. As observed by Anidi et al. (2021, p.147), the men in Nwapa's first novel:

...have practically no key role to play in the affairs of their families and communities. They are depicted as weak, irrational, selfish and irresponsible. They have nothing but sorrow to offer to their families and communities. They contribute little to the upkeep of their families, live licentious lives and seem to glory in destabilizing the peace and harmony in their household.

Nwapa's depiction of men as feckless, self-serving, and disruptive figures directly polarise traditional patriarchal narratives that position men as providers, protectors, and pillars of their communities. Her characterisation renders men weak in that they lack moral strength, social responsibility, and positive agency within their families

and communities. Even so, Adimora-Ezeigbo has also been accused of ‘intentionally or unintentionally demean[ing] the male characters she created’ in her *The Last of the Strong Ones* (Tobalase and Aikabeli, 2017, p.16).

Gender discourse in literature has traditionally operated in a dispersed and less overtly confrontational mode. Before recent developments, ‘gender wars’ and the politics of gender (mis)representation were largely conducted through individual authorial interventions within their respective works, with differing perspectives emerging across various texts. This created a pool of representations and counter-representations but without a sustained, direct engagement between specific authors or texts. This indirect approach allowed for a multiplicity of viewpoints to coexist, albeit often in tension, without necessarily generating explicit textual dialogues or rebuttals. However, a new generation of writers like Damilare Kuku and Ugochukwu Ugonna has emerged, authors who have brought gender wars close, marking a shift towards a directly dialogic engagement with gender politics. The interaction between the prosaic brainchildren of the aforementioned authors is so tangible even in their titles: Kuku’s *Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad* and Ugonna’s *Who Made Nearly All the Men in Lagos Mad?* This paper, therefore, interrogates Kuku’s attempts to subvert the *femme fatale* archetype of ‘a woman who consciously or unconsciously seduces and destroys man’ (Weis, 1979, p. 18) and Ugonna’s reinforcement of this archetype in their dialogic collections of short stories as products of propaganda used in the politics of gender (mis)representation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic theory revolutionised the way literature is approached, challenging the notion of a singular, fixed meaning within a text and proposing, instead, the relationship between voices and perspectives. According to him (1981, p.xxviii), ‘Literary language is not represented in the novel [as it is in other genres] as a unitary, completely finished off, indubitably adequate language — it is represented precisely as a living mix of varied and opposing voices’. Thus, the literary form of a novel does not allow language to be presented as a homogenous and definitively authoritative entity. The novel showcases language as a dynamic and heterogeneous phenomenon, a mix of ‘varied and opposing voices’ and not a centripetal one pulling into a single authoritative unit. The novel then incorporates different styles, dialects, and perspectives which aid the creation of a polyphonic or multi-voiced text where various social and individual voices interact, clash, and sometimes harmonise. These multiple voices are not prioritised in monologism where, ‘Ideally, a single consciousness and a single mouth are perfectly sufficient for a whole fullness of knowledge; there is no need and no basis for a multitude of consciousnesses’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p.69). This describes a discourse characterised by the possession of complete and absolute truth or, perhaps, its claim.

The monologic voice suppresses or excludes any other perspective, viewpoint, or dialogue because the truth expressed in it is singular and pre-existing, needing no further examination or contestation through interaction with other voices. According to Beyad and Javanian (2018, p.382):

Dialogism includes a wide range of Bakhtinian thoughts and concepts, including heteroglossia, polyphony, chronotope, and unfinalizability. What all these dialogic elements have in common is their emphasis on the constant interaction between various texts as autonomous discourses. In other words, every text is situated in a network of discursive powers that shape its overall signification and understanding.

Therefore, dialogism disaggregates monologism in some way and encompasses a cluster of interconnected concepts like heteroglossia (the coexistence of multiple languages or social dialects within a single language), polyphony (the presence of multiple independent voices and perspectives in a text), chronotope (the fusion of time and space in literary representation), and unfinalizability (the idea that meaning is never fixed or complete). These elements are bent on their stance that texts do not exist on insular modes but hang in a web of interacting discourses including other texts. These discursive influences collectively regulate how a text is understood and interpreted, configuring its overall meaning and significance.

In dialogism, a text references, draws inspiration from, or even challenges other texts. This parallels Stam’s (2000, p.208) declaration that ‘the word “dialogism” in Bakhtin’s writings progressively accretes meanings and connotations without ever losing this central idea of “the relation between the utterance and other utterances”’ (208). Following this line of thought, Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism progressively accumulates new meanings by exploring how interpretation arises not just from individual voices within a text but also from a text’s interaction with other texts. This compels Bakhtin’s (1981, p.291) statement that:

...at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form.

This submission summarises why this theory is suitable for this essay as it embodies the tensions and conflicts between various social and ideological forces, reflecting the association of past and present influences in interpretation. Bakhtin's stratification manifests in the coexistence of linguistic variations that represent different periods, distinct social groups, and competing perspectives within the same society. This sentiment is shared by Holquist (1999, pp.20-21) who argues that in dialogism, 'all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying simultaneous but different space' be it 'political bodies' or 'bodies of ideas in general (ideologies)'.

According to Sarah McCarthy (2004, p.30), Bakhtin's theories of dialogism include 'ventriloquation, internally persuasive discourse, and speech genre'. However, the aspect of dialogism adopted in this critique is internally persuasive discourse. While making a distinction between internally persuasive discourse and externally authoritative discourse, Bakhtin (1981, p.346) notes that the former, 'affirmed through assimilation, [is] tightly interwoven with "one's own word"'. In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's'. This points to the fact that a persuasive message is accepted because it aligns with, or is assimilated into, the listener's/reader's way of thinking. The listener/reader then takes ownership of the idea, feeling like it resonates with their beliefs. It is from this persuasive stance that this essay engages Kuku's *Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad* and Ugonna's *Who Made Nearly All the Men in Lagos Mad?*

### 3. Gender War in Kuku's and Ugonna's Dialogic Narratives

The incrimination of men in Kuku's collection of short stories starts from the title of her work, and one of the agents used by the author for this process is her portraiture of men as paragons of infidelity. In the first story — 'Cuck-Up' —, the plot opens at its peak with the female protagonist saying:

One night, you will calmly put a knife to your husband's penis and promise to cut it off. It will scare him so much that the next day, he will call his family members for a meeting in the house. He will not call your family members, but you will not care. You won't need them (p.5).

The use of some rather obscene words in the stories without an attempt to be euphemistic is a pointer to the height of women's frustration such that they care less about toning down the level of sexual lexicon while expressing their ordeals. In the opening words of the entire text, a reader begins to wonder what crime/sin a man would have committed to compel his wife to attempt such an act, thereby foregrounding the atrocious revelations made as the story progresses. The stereotype usually sustained by many men about Igbo women is captured in the story. Immediately Isioma (often shortened to 'Isi'), the protagonist, is accused of attempted murder, the popular belief that Igbo women are wicked is immediately brought forward: 'Shebi I told him not to marry you? I said marry someone from your tribe. Igbo women are dangerous' (p.5).

The title of the collection must not, at any point, be forgotten while reading the stories because the men who are accused of being mad span across brothers, fathers, uncles, male friends, male cousins, and many other categories of men. In this regard, it is not only Isi's husband who is mad but also his uncle, Buraimo, who fans the embers of tribalism by discouraging inter-tribal marriage in a highly multi-tribal country like Nigeria. But even if Buraimo's nephew had settled for a fellow Yoruba, the disaster would have been inexorable because madness resides in Lagos men and not women. In the world of Kuku's text, all male members within the same family can be mad. In Isi's case, her husband, his uncle, and brother are mad. While a grave issue is addressed, Mufu, Isi's brother-in-law, steals a wristwatch. It is not the first time Mufu would be stealing from the family, but he is encouraged by his brother who is too scared to tame his madness. Within this context, 'mad' men (Isi's husband in this case) also encourage other men (his brother as a case in point) to maintain their insanity. Noteworthy in the story is that men's madness can be clothed with many appealing qualities. For instance, Isi recounts that Lukumon 'wrote love letters, recited delicious poetry, whispered magic in your ears, and sang as you danced till you believed the lyrics of all the world's love songs were written just for you' (p.7). This is to convince a doubting mind that has been deceived by the romantic and sane appearance of many Lagos men that within this sane demeanour lays a whirlpool of madness.

In the first story, it is the man who acts both as a pulling and pushing factor of infidelity. More specifically, Isi does not mind toiling so hard to cater for her daughter and even for her husband. She even ventures into selling roasted corn and plantain by the roadside while her husband does not care enough to do something substantial for the benefit of the whole family. Isi narrates: 'Lukumon had argued that you were wasting money because Kitan could thrive in a public school and turn out well, just like he did. But you'd quietly said, "My child will never go to a public school in Nigeria as long as I'm alive"' (p.10). Although it is Isi's money being invested in their child's education, Lukumon discourages this and opts for a subpar school with zero contribution to the cause. He would rather accrue the money than see his daughter obtain a quality education. As Isi's business grows, Ehi, a wealthy businessman, becomes Isi's regular customer. He offers money which Isi

declines at first but subsequently accepts. Isi is portrayed as a virtuous woman who respects the sanctity of matrimony and motherhood while her husband, on the other hand, does not meet the quintessential standards of fatherhood. In fact, when a proposal is made that he should submit his curriculum vitae to Ehi for employment, he displays intense disinterestedness, spawning the belief that he relishes in his laziness while he allows his wife to bear, in totality, the financial burden of the house.

When Ehi initially gives his amorous proposal, Isi thinks: ‘How dare this man insult you? “Sir,” your tone was cold, “please don’t buy anything from me again. I’m a married woman. My husband is man enough for me, and I’ll never cheat on him. You’ve insulted both of us and—” ’ (p.15). To show the extent to which Isi feels disrespected, she ‘felt a tear run down your [her] cheek’ (p.15). Everything initially points to Isi’s desire to be loyal irrespective of whatever her tragic life unfolds, her high regard for matrimonial bonds in stark contrast with her husband’s disregard for the solemnity of marriage. When Isi reports Ehi’s sexual advances to her husband, he encourages his wife to be unfaithful because of the promised gain to be received from such a detrimental act. Even though the story begins at its climax, Isi’s reason for wanting to cut off her husband’s manhood is withheld while the protagonist lets readers in on the buildup of the plot. Towards the end, Isi finally pleads:

Lukumon, please tell your family why you made me sleep with another man for money, but treated me like a leper when I returned. Explain why you refused to take the job the man offered you, but you insisted that I took the money, rent this house, and buy you that stupid watch. Tell them why you have refused to touch me but you’re sleeping with every girl in the neighbourhood. Why did you say yesterday that you don’t think Kitan is your child? (p.21)

The madness attributed to Lagos men in Kuku’s collection of short stories is materialised in Isi’s revelation above. Lukumon’s actions—pimping his wife and subsequently ostracising her—likely cemented his reputation for insanity, suggesting the societal construction of madness as a response to deviations from established norms of marital and economic exchange.

Lukumon basically lived off the same life he now despises; the same life he encouraged in the first place. There were better options than coaxing his wife into sleeping with another man for money but he chose to languish in his unwillingness to work. Ehi’s proffered employment with a promising sufficient income for the family’s immediate needs was declined, a decision that suggests mental illness in itself. Lukumon’s continued resentment towards Isi, even as she complies with his demand to engage in sexual relations with Ehi, defies rational justification, resembling a perverse attempt to simultaneously possess and disown. Because Isi cannot comprehend why her husband would act that way even after all that he encouraged, the former resolves: ‘One last thing — if Lukumon doesn’t move out of this house, I will cut off his penis and use it for money rituals’ (p.21). This suggests the fact that Lagos men do not possess the monopoly of madness but can be met with proportionate or more madness. In this case, Isi can no longer withstand the lunacy of her husband and promises that the next time she holds a knife to Lukumo’s manhood, it will not be a threat or gimmick.

In ‘Anointed Wife’, another short story, the narrator begins with rhetorical questions: ‘Do you think it is easy to be a pastor’s wife? How can you know what it means to be the partner of a man with a divine calling, made of flesh but instructed to lead with the spirit?’ (p.35) These questions set the tone for the religious hypocrisy addressed in the story. One of the outstanding things to be noted in Kuku’s text is that women are not presented as people whose actions are always saintly but whose sparse evil deeds are a direct product of the madness of Lagos men. For although it is the woman who resorts to lies and propaganda to silence the truth in ‘Anointed Wife’, she does so in an attempt to cover up the promiscuous life of her cheating husband who happens to be a religious leader. Hence, what one may call a necessary sin; a timely reaction to curb the effects of an action. The madness of Lagos men is not congenital but ‘acquired’ while growing, such that the sanity of a Lagos man at the conceptual stage of his life does not make him immune to madness which is almost inevitable. This is the case of Tade, Evelyn’s husband, the anointed husband. At the beginning of the short story, Tade is accused of committing adultery with a sex worker which Evelyn dismisses as defamation of character because she had been married to a sane man.

The insanity of Lagos men respects no boundaries and has even crept into the church via religious leaders. While addressing what she thinks is a false accusation, Evelyn writes to the public: ‘...if my husband — our daddy in the Lord was a twin, I think his wife of twenty years would know. Unless the young lady met my husband’s long lost brother that we have never heard of, then her claim of staying with Daddy throughout the night is false’ (p.37). She is very convinced that her husband could not have done such, but this conviction does not prepare her for the revelation ahead. While the notion of unfettered personal choice holds a certain appeal, Kuku’s portrayal of Lagosian ‘madness’ demonstrates the fallacy of such a perspective, revealing the ripple effects of individual actions on interconnected social circles, especially familial and friendship bonds. This is why Evelyn admits that her ‘children are being mocked in school as the ones with the father that likes ashewos, the church

lines have been ringing nonstop and our daddy in the Lord seems to be struggling through all of these because he is human' (p.37). Children who do not even understand the concept of and consequences of an amorous life also suffer the effects of their father's madness.

Evelyn rationalises the sex worker's accusation as she believes it is the usual sex scandal that religious leaders are often associated with, just what she directly tells the reader: 'I know what you're thinking. You think I'm wrong in supporting my husband, abi? Is it not a cliché at this point to accuse powerful men of scandalous things?' (p.37) Hence, although it appears outdated to accuse powerful power of such things, Evelyn asserts: 'I know Tade' (p.37). For most of the story, Evelyn tries to convince both the reader and the characters that her husband is not capable of committing adultery based on such precedents as his unwillingness to initiate sexual intercourse before marriage and his initial apathy for intimacy. She remembers: 'He backed away as I stood up and walked towards him. He muttered something about this being wrong. So, I said okay, I wouldn't do it again' (p.37). This restates one of the focal points in Kuku's collection of short stories that because a man was at some point 'perfect' does not make him immune to the pending madness that awaits him. The problem here is that Evelyn still conceives of her husband as that sane man who detested fornication in his youthful days. It is logical to think that one who spurned fornication would desist from adultery, but Lagos men defy logic.

There is almost nothing Tade's madness has not made Evelyn do — she deploys many strategies to prevent the fall of the church. She admits that her role as a pastor's wife is 'multi-layered, like an onion' (p.41) because she has been forced by circumstances to dress in a certain way to attract the listening ears of the public in her quest to save the reputation of God's house. Her husband's infidelity adds another layer of complexity to her already multifaceted existence as a pastor's wife, necessitating her evolution into a shrewd strategist, meticulously calculating the 'what', 'when', and 'how' of her actions to achieve her mission. She is also conscious of how they appear on screen in order to look human and by extension, fallible — after all, do they not say that the best of men are but men at best? The insanity of most Lagos men is heightened in the description given by the sex worker on how Tade, a pastor, carried out this sexual act:

He tied my arms to the bedposts and spread my legs. He dipped his fingers into a bottle of oil which he called 'the anointing oil that will break the yoke' and rubbed it on my clitoris and then he crawled in between my legs and whispered against my pussy. 'I have come to worship at your temple.' He started to lick me and then he grabbed my thighs, wrapping them around his neck. 'I want to be delivered! Deliver me sister!' (p.50)

The above depicts insanity at a whole different level, prompting many questions: why is an acclaimed man of God engaging in BDSM? Why is he using anointing oil to break the yoke from the same temple he seeks deliverance from? Besides, from what exactly does he want to be delivered? The same sin he is engaging in in the first place? These unanswered questions, and more, substantiate Kuku's avowal that nearly all the men in Lagos are mad.

The phrase 'Lagos men' does not refer to people who are natives of Lagos but those who live in Lagos irrespective of their state of origin and even nationality. More specifically, Lagos is a vector of male madness, such that even a White man living in Lagos is also infected by it. The narrator, MsMacauley, in the short story, 'International Relations', says that she is 'tired of Lagos men. Nearly all of them are mad. Awonweyrey! The standard Lagos-Man package comes with lying, cheating, and occasional scamming; alongside stylish kaftans, splashes of Savage or Ouds, and fake accents' (p.54). Initially, she thinks that the men in Lagos who are mad are Nigerians and as such, those whose nationality is not Nigerian are immune to this endemic. Consequently, she thinks: 'I've finally seen the light — it's bright, and so white. By white, I mean oyibo. Yes, I'm going international and not looking back. I swear, the next man I date in this Lagos will be an oyibo: so help me God' (p.54). As indicated here, she has resolved to not settle for Nigerian men but for White men.

However, she is oblivious of the fact that the city of Lagos is a non-selective vector that infects nearly every man. She makes a list of must-haves for the intended White man she hopes to go into a relationship with. First, he 'mustn't have a poverty mentality' (p.55) like her exes; then he 'should have his own money' (p.56) because she was tired of lending money to Lagos men whom she dated; must be 'ugly or at least plain looking' (p.56) so that he would be grateful for dating her; should have 'youthful energy' (p.56) and be a lover of 'gentle lovemaking' (p.56) and not aggressive lovemaking. She meets a Lebanese but dismisses the idea of dating him because 'Lebanese no beoyibo!' (p.58), continuing her search until she almost gives up when a Ukrainian, MrZherdev, comes her way. The day MrZherdev meets Kwesi, MsMacauley's Ghanaian friend, at the narrator's house, he causes a scene and implores: '“You have good man now.” He poked his chest. “Me! You too old to change man every day. So, you never talk to . . .” he pointed to Kwesi, “. . . that man again. Okay?” (p.70) The narrator feels disrespected by the Ukrainian's words/actions even after making it clear to Kwesi that Mr Zherdev is her boyfriend. At the realisation that MrZherdev also falls into the large category of mad Lagos men, she orders him out of her house. At the end, she asks: 'Looking back though, sometimes I wonder if there is peculiar

madness that possesses men once they are in Lagos? Are all men in Lagos mad or is it me?... Nearly all of them are mad. Awonweyrey' (p.72)! At this point, despite being posed as questions, it has been demystified that it is not only male natives of Lagos that are mad but residents of Lagos, natives or foreigners alike.

On the other hand, the opening lines of the first short story in Ugonna's literary riposte to Kuku — 'Swiped Right' — say: 'We deh do hook-up, you lose guard come dey fall in love, eeh Bella?' (p.1) This question is very crucial in this dialogic discourse and cannot be treated with levity as it sets the trajectory of the entire text. The inference is that many women in Kuku's collection of short stories missed or perhaps, denied the reality that whatever they have with Lagos men is a kind of transactional relationship; anything but love. Unfortunately, these women foist all that love represents on a relationship that is not built on love from both parties, and when it fails, they whine about being heartbroken. This is clear in Jide and Bella's relationship as the narrator reports a conversation between the duo:

'Was it not on Tinder we met? You swiped right, and I swiped right too. Did I open my mouth and ask you to be my girlfriend?' Jide was already late for work and didn't want to continue this discussion. He couldn't be bothered about Bella's words, he didn't want to be, and he just wanted to leave the house for work. Yet, she kept at it, and he started to wish he had ignored her profile on the app (p.1).

It is now explicit that Bella, by meeting Jide on Tinder, has assumed that they are already dating simply because of her claims that she 'cooks, cleans and stays faithful' (p.1) and never because Jide has ever asked her out. This assumption is detrimental to Bella as the disillusionment that follows compels her to tilt towards the narratives of women in Kuku's text where they claim that men are cheats.

With the first short story, Ugonna subtly dislodges the basis upon which Kuku's text is predicated — if the men in Lagos are actually mad, it is the women who drove them. Bella's defence to Jide's claim that he never asked her out is that Tinder is a dating app and not a hook-up app, to which Jide replies: 'Maybe in the abroad. In Nigeria, it is for hook-up' (p.2). Bella maintains that her profile makes no mention of prostitution, but the visual content of her page, replete with scantily clad self-portraits, suggests a different narrative:

'Didn't you read my bio? I wasn't there for hook-up! I indicated it very clearly.' 'How would I see it when you had all those raunchy pictures on your profile showing half of your private parts as if they were on black Friday sales?' Jide blurts. 'It's my body, Jide. And I choose what I do with it!' 'I am not stopping you from advertising your merchandise to the whole world, but don't wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me you're pregnant for me when I don't know who else you've been shagging from that app.' Jide pointed a firm finger at her face. 'If that was a joke, stop it now' (p.2).

The narrator points out that besides Jide, Bella still has intimate relationships with 'Kenny, Dozie and Ben' (p.3). Bella's stance exemplifies a power imbalance where she asserts her agency while seeking to curtail the autonomy of men, dictating their thoughts and deeds.

A certain amusement arises from the observation that Bella, while denying Jide the right to bodily autonomy, claims that very right for herself. According to the narrator, 'she kept putting him [Kenny] on hold, never making the decision to marry him or not' (p.3). The implication is that she is strategic and only wants to keep her options open for the highest bidder — if she cannot get Jide to marry her, she can then fall back on Kenny. This is what the narrator subsequently affirms when he says that 'When the desirable is not available, the available becomes desirable' (p.7). Bella lives a despicable life in Lagos but never considers accountability. There are no boundaries she respects as her cousin who accommodated her once 'caught Bella in bed with her fiancé just a week to their wedding' (p.5). These hideous actions should compel her to abandon her high moral grounds but she still parades herself as a saint by never taking accountability for her actions. Bella's strategy involves a consistent externalisation of blame, assigning fault to every male sexual partner and maintaining her innocence. The narrator reports:

When Bella was done, Kike said: 'I didn't trust Jide at all. Yoruba boys will always be Yoruba demons.' 'He is Igbo. His name is Jidenna.' 'What? He's Igbo? Why is it that once these Igbo boys enter Lagos like this, they all change into Yoruba demons? I don't know what is in this Lagos that is causing all of them to change' (p.6).

Disturbingly, Kike's response to the recounted events is a sweeping generalisation, attributing Jide's actions to a supposed inherent characteristic of Yoruba men, predicated on his perceived ethnic identity. Now privy to the reality that Jide is Igbo, she spins another stereotype — Lagos turns men into Yoruba demons. This then becomes a convenient escape route from accountability and peddling propaganda about men becomes the last resort.

The characters of Bella and Kike make a reader question Kuku's narrative because, from another perspective, Ugonna paints a picture where Lagos women will always say that Lagos men are cheats and liars even when they are the ones perpetuating evil. Bella had been turned off by a marriage proposal from Kenny because, for her, 'he was in such a haste to wed her' (p.6). Ironically, she does not consider it a haste to have sex with Kenny; she does not consider it a haste to have sex with Jide and even get pregnant, but it is considered haste for Kenny to wish to marry her after 7 months. Now that she is pregnant and has been kicked out of the house by Jide, her best bet is Kenny whom she fools as seen in the conversation below:

'Must you travel tomorrow? Will anything spoil if you travel on Monday morning? So, we can spend the weekend together,' Kenny said. He always loved her company. 'I have to go tomorrow, and I may not be coming back to Lagos anytime soon,' Bella said. These things were taught in business schools: how to use scarcity to create demand. Bella knew that if she gives Kenny the impression that he may not see her again for a long time, he would be forced to bring up marriage talks again (p.7).

Displaced from her residence, Bella fabricates a narrative of rural exodus, leveraging Kenny's credulity to conceal her lack of viable alternatives and explain her laden bags. Beyond that, by telling Kenny that she does not intend to come back to Lagos soon, Kenny is forced to reignite talks about marrying her. These are the issues that Ugonna unravels to justify the alleged madness of nearly all Lagos men.

In Kuku's stories, men are presented as cheats even at the level of matrimony. In Ugonna's text, the narrator shows how loving men are paternally defrauded by Lagos women who are presented as almost flawless in Kuku's text. In 'Swiped Right', Bella, with her art of manipulating events to her favour, gets Kenny to have sex with her that same night which means pinning the pregnancy on him. Ugonna portrays Lagos men as remarkably patient, enduring pain from Lagos women before reaching their breaking point. This is evinced when reports reach Kenny that his cousin, Andrew, had met Bella on Tinder and even had sex with her. Kenny defends Bella, trying to convince his mother who has been telling him to go for a paternity test that whatever life Bella lived is in the past and does not define who she is now. After what seems like a series of nagging from her mother, Kenny goes for the test, realising that the child is not his. At this revelation, 'His mother who had accompanied him for the results embraced him, and Kenny who couldn't remember if anything had ever made him cry in his life began to sob as he pondered on the wickedness of humans. His mother cried as well' (p.12).

Ugonna does something almost unnoticed with Kenny. Although he is intensely hurt so much by Bella that he weeps, something he does not remember ever doing, he does not pin it on women but on humans generally. Thus, even when Lagos women in the story are behind the madness of Lagos men, the men still assess this wickedness from a generic standpoint and not a gender-specific stance, what Lagos women do not do, a case in point being the women in Kuku's collection of short stories. The narrator does not fail to emboss the systemic art of manipulation and theatrics by Lagos women especially when fazed by an uncomfortable truth. When it is revealed, for instance, that the child is not Kenny's, she weeps more than everyone: ' "I knew it! I knew it o!" Bella lifted herself as high as she could and threw herself on the bare floor, rolling from one side of the room to the other. . . . She wailed, tore her dress, and started to hit her head on the wall until Kenny rushed to grab her and hold her still' (p.13). It is worthy of note that Lagos women see through the charade staged by other Lagos women as Kenny's mother sees through Bella's performative act but allows her to create illusions of her choice. For her, Bella was better off to the family alive than dead because people would say that 'her son used his wife for money rituals' (p.14).

Had Bella died trying to play innocent and heartbroken, people would weave stories of how Kenny was the aggressor while Bella was the victim; stories detailing how mad nearly all the men in Lagos are. Ugonna completes the pieces of Kuku's jigsaw puzzle which readers never knew were missing. This is because, in *Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad*, a reader can barely suspect that Lagos women are behind the madness of nearly all Lagos men until Ugonna's rejoinder, *Who Drove Nearly All the Men in Lagos Mad?*, is read. Jilting is one index of madness often attributed to nearly all Lagos men, and Ugonna addresses this in 'The Mugu of Mushin'. In this short story, Victoria is pimped out by her boyfriend to lace her clients' drinks, robbing them when they are asleep. Exposed by a client, her waiting boyfriend denies her, resulting in a brutal assault from which she is ultimately rescued by a passing Samaritan, Lucas. This act of compassion, extending beyond mere intervention to include sustenance, clothing, and extended shelter, deserves reciprocal benevolence, not malevolence which he is eventually paid with.

As innocent and sane as Lucas is, Victoria ends up stripping him of his sanity by plotting to defraud him with the assistance of the same abusive boyfriend who left her to be severely beaten. Lucas, having seen Victoria have sex with her boyfriend in his apartment through hidden cameras, decides to dump her. He hands her an envelope to deliver to someone while he drives off as shown in the excerpt below:



Victoria takes the envelope, comes down from the car, and is walking towards the man to hand over the envelope as instructed, when Lucas zooms off in his car at full throttle. At first, Victoria stares in confusion, until she stops to open the envelope and sees a note that reads: 'Returning you to the streets where you belong' (p.78).

Judging from the events in Ugonna's collection of short stories, it is logical to infer that if Victoria were to report what happened to her friend, Aanu, Lucas would not be presented as the hero that he is in that story but rather as a lover who jilted her for just no reason; as one of the 'usual' mad Lagos men.

The eponymous short story in Ugonna's text — 'Who Drove Nearly All Lagos Men Mad?' — dissects the root problem of many relationships where Lagos women end up saying that nearly all the men in Lagos are mad. With an *in medias res* style of plot narration, the story begins in the middle, back to the beginning, and then proceeds to the end. This narrative technique is not coincidental but deliberately deployed to better expose the women in Kuku's narrative. This is evident in the first page of the story where the narrator reports thus:

Ada blows her nose into a tissue paper as she sits on the bed in Nancy's exquisitely furnished two-bedroom serviced apartment located at Onike, the heart of Yaba... As she blows her nose, she dumps the tissue on a pile of rough sodden toilet paper littered on the bedside table and tucks herself properly into the duvet. Her eyes are red from too many tears as she laments. Ah, Femi! Femi!! Oluwafikunfemi!!! It shall never be well with you. Ada caught Femi cheating on her for the third time in a row, right after he swore on his mother's grave, a week ago, to never cheat on her again (p.156).

If ended this way, this story becomes a quintessence of any of Kuku's short stories in her *Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad* because it successfully projects the innocence of Lagos women represented by Ada against the wickedness of Lagos men represented by Femi. The strategic deployment of this form of narration by the narrator shows the bias of a one-sided story where conclusions are drawn based on the narrative of one party. As an illustration, on the first page of the eponymous story, a reader agrees with the Lagos women in Kuku's narrative that nearly all Lagos men are mad, and thus, are not prepared for the pending twist.

Ugonna implies that Kuku's text is solely engrossed in expounding what is and not what led to it — the sequel and never the prequel; the reaction and not the action; the effect but not the cause. These ignored antecedents, by inference, leave out a chunk of the whole picture like an iceberg whose bigger part is buried in water. In the short story, Ada is actively promiscuous, and she ditches her friend with benefit, Kunle, who has no record of having another sexual partner, for a known internet fraudster, Femi. As an archetype of many Lagos women, Ada follows wherever the money goes and suddenly preaches faithfulness just after securing a rich boyfriend despite knowing he is a fraudster. This explains the bias evident in the opening pages, as Ada, fully cognisant of Femi's character, nevertheless rejects Kunle whose intentions and plans for her are honourable, in favour of a misguided belief in her capacity to reform Femi. All of a sudden, the once very amorous Ada becomes 'very content in her relationship' (p.166) because Femi 'surprised her with a shiny Toyota Camry XLE as a birthday present' and has been giving her several treats. Ada's belief that Femi cannot cheat on her is funny to her friend, Nancy who asks: 'Let me get this straight, Femi lies to unsuspecting human beings and swindle them out of their hard-earned money, but here you are believing he cannot lie to you too?' (p.167).

Ada makes excuses for a man who has shown signs of promiscuity but she opts for denial because he affords the lifestyle she desires. The dialogic loop that connects Kuku's *Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad* with Ugonna's *Who Made Nearly All Lagos Men Mad?* is most unambiguously captured in the last lines of Ugonna's eponymous short story:

'I think she was right,' Ada says as she stares at Nancy who looks lost. 'Who is right?' 'The lady who wrote that nearly all Lagos men are mad,' Ada says. 'Question is: who drove them mad? People don't just run mad, do they?' Nancy asks. 'Some people were born mad.' 'If you expected a fraudster, who cheats to make a living, to not cheat on you, then we might need to re-examine who the mad person here really is,' Nancy says with a smirk. Ada gives her a death-stare, wishing she can rip that smirk off Nancy's face (p.172).

Thus, for Nancy, it is dishonest to go after congenitally mad Lagos men and claim victimhood when they do the things mad people do. Beyond that, it is also fraudulent to focus on the madness of Lagos men without recourse to why they are mad in the first place. This is because, according to Nancy, people do not just run mad and these antecedents are lacking in Ada's claim. Through Nancy, Ugonna's submission is that perhaps madness has no place in the congenitally mad Lagos men but in the Lagos women who believe that they can heal them and cry foul when they fail to do so.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the short stories in Kuku's text, she creates a unified discourse where the different stories weave similar narratives aimed at portraying the madness of nearly all Lagos men. However, while meaning can be extracted from interactions among Kuku, the author; the work, and the reader; this paper chisels out meaning in a broader context by scaling the discourse from Kuku's perspective in *Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad* with Ugonna's perspective in *Who Made Nearly All the Men in Lagos Mad?* The exchange between Ada and Nancy at the end of Ugonna's eponymous short story exemplifies Bakhtin's concept of dialogism through its explicit intertextual reference and the resulting interchange of voices. Ugonna's text directly engages with Kuku's work, creating a textual dialogue where one work responds to and reinterprets the other. Ada's invocation of Damilare Kuku immediately establishes a connection to her text, positioning it as a pre-existing discourse within the conversation. Nancy's subsequent questions and counter-arguments then engage with this established discourse, creating an exchange of perspectives. The disagreement between Ada and Nancy further amplifies the dialogic nature of the interaction, demonstrating how different interpretations and responses can emerge from engagement with a single text. This intertextual dialogue, fuelled by varying viewpoints, showcases the heteroglossia inherent in the discourse surrounding gender relations where a chorus of voices converges, preventing any single interpretation from achieving dominance. The conclusion drawn from this dialogic exegesis is that Ugonna's collection of short stories is not necessarily a counter-narrative to Kuku's text but an attempt at rationalising the madness of Lagos men so projected in Kuku's collection of short stories.

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